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EXEMPTION

A WAR PLAYLET

By
Alice Norris-Lewis

Author of "The Spy
at St. Agnes'"

MARCH BROTHERS, Publishers
208, 210, 212 Wright Ave., Lebanon, Ohio

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Exemption

A war playlet in one act for two males and eight females. Time in presentation 30 minutes.

CHARACTERS

ETHEL CUMMINGS, who does not want her husband to enlist.

HAROLD CUMMINGS, her husband, who enlists in spite of her.

PAULA STICKNEY, a butterfly, who intends to claim exemption for her husband who has been drafted.

DICKIE STICKNEY, her husband, with a backbone of his own.

JEAN,	}	Friends of Ethel's and Paula's.
MOLLY,		
SUE,		
RUTH,		
MYRTLE,		
A MAID.		

COSTUMES

Strictly modern and fashionable for women. United States Army uniform for Harold Cummings after enlistment. Dickie Stickney, Naval uniform.

SCENE—Well-furnished living room. Table in center. Window at left. Entrance at right. [*As the curtain rises Ethel Cummings is standing beside table in center. Her back is half turned towards Harold, who, on the opposite side of the table, leans upon it as he speaks very slowly and decidedly.*]

HAROLD: My mind is fully made up, and nothing can change it. Nothing, Ethel.

ETHEL: Harold!

HAROLD: So far I have listened to you and been a slacker. But nobody can make a coward of me all the time—not even my wife.

ETHEL: You talk like a brute!

HAROLD: Nothing of the kind. I'm telling you the truth, that's all. If I stay out of this I shall be ashamed to look people in the face for the rest of my life. So I've enlisted in the Sixtieth Engineers — for immediate service in France.

ETHEL: No, no, not that! That's the most dangerous branch of the service.

HAROLD: Dangerous, fiddlesticks! If you mean it's the branch that is apt to see some smoke and powder, I hope it is. I enlisted to

fight—not for some cushy job back of the lines. [*He goes to Ethel and takes her hand, which she lets him hold passively.*] In a way it seems hard, little girl, I admit. But I feel it is up to me. It's something that is come my way and I must be game. Don't you understand? Can't you? You know it isn't as though I left you to work or struggle along on a scanty allowance. You'll not miss me so far as money is concerned.

ETHEL [*snatching away her hand and going to window*]: As though I thought of money, Harold!

HAROLD: Haven't you a spark of patriotism in you?

ETHEL: Not a glimmer where you are concerned.

HAROLD: I'm ashamed of you!

ETHEL: I'm telling you the truth as you told me a few moments ago.

HAROLD: There's no use talking any longer. I'm going for my uniform. [*He goes to window and tries to turn Ethel's face towards his. She shakes off his hand.*] Come, be a good fellow! [*Ethel refuses to turn. Harold shrugs his shoulders.*] Very well. I'm off. [*He strides to door, opens it, turns back and speaks.*] Ethel! [*Ethel does not turn. He goes out and bangs*

the door. The moment he is gone Ethel runs frantically across the stage, opens the door and calls to him. He does not answer. She runs back to window, knocks and calls. He does not hear. She flings herself down in a chair and buries her head in her hands. Enter a maid.]

MAID: Mrs. Stickney is below, madame.

ETHEL [*raising her head.*] Send her up.
[*Exit maid. Ethel hastily arranges her hair and snatches up her knitting. As Mrs. Stickney enters she is busily working.*]

MRS. STICKNEY: Here she is, knitting like an old granny. How many sweaters does this make you've knit, Ethel?

ETHEL: Ten. Take off your hat and coat and be comfortable.

MRS. S.: Ten! My goodness, you've done your bit all right. I came a little before time, didn't I? What time was it we were to meet, anyway?

ETHEL: I'm glad you did come early.

MRS. S.: Tilly told me to tell you she couldn't possibly get away this afternoon. All the other girls will be on hand, though. I saw Harold rushing along like a whirlwind. Where was he going so tempestously?

ETHEL: After his uniform. He's enlisted.

MRS. S.: What!

ETHEL: Yes, he's enlisted.

MRS. S.: But how foolish of him. He didn't have to, did he? He's over draft age, too, wasn't he?

ETHEL: Three whole months.

MRS. S.: I call that downright foolishness. Now there's Dickie; he's in the draft. But I'm going to have him claim exemption.

ETHEL: Can you do that?

MRS. S. [*taking out a pink sweater and beginning to knit*]: Oh, yes, I think so, if I get a good lawyer. You see, he couldn't give me enough to live on and I'd have to go back to father. Business hasn't been good this year and he'd have to strain a point to keep me.

ETHEL: Why, Paula, I've always understood that your father was the richest man in town. At least you've said so a great many times.

MRS. S.: Oh, well, I can make a point of it if I want to.

ETHEL: But does Dickie want exemption?

MRS. S.: I may as well tell you the truth. He does not. But I told him he simply could not go. I'm ill half the time now, and I'd die of anxiety if he went to war.

ETHEL: It takes a lot of anxiety to kill, Paula.

MRS. S.: How sarcastic you are. That's another excuse I'm going to use with the lawyer. I thought you might like some pointers in case you wanted to claim exemption for Harold.

ETHEL: I couldn't get him released from service. He'd die of shame if I even mentioned it. He's wild to go.

MRS. S.: I know a woman whose husband enlisted and was in England, and she made some kind of a fuss. They sent the man home, too.

ETHEL: I wouldn't dare try such a scheme, and you'd better not, Paula. Hark, I hear the girls. [*Enter Jean, Molly, Sue and Ruth.*]

JEAN: Here we are. Have you begun another sweater, Ethel Cummings? And you, Paula Stickney, still knitting on pale pink. Why don't you knit on khaki?

PAULA: It's such heavy yarn it tires me to death.

JEAN: I saw your man in the recruiting office in uniform, Ethel. What did that mean?

ETHEL: He's enlisted.

SUE: Three cheers for him. And you, too, Ethel—to let him go when he wasn't actually obliged to.

MOLLY: What branch is he going in for?

ETHEL: I think he said the engineering corps.

SUE: Of course, he has his C. E. from college, hasn't he? How about Dickie, Paula? Has he enlisted yet?

PAULA: No, he hasn't. But he's in the draft. I don't think he can pass the examination, though.

MOLLY: Which one—mental or physical?

PAULA: His eyes are bad, you know. I pass over the slur on his mental condition. And again I couldn't live on what he'll leave me.

MOLLY: Your father's still working, isn't he? So long as he continues in the patent medicine business you should worry about Dickie's income.

SUE: Stop squabbling, girls. It's Paula's own affair about Dickie, Molly. Did you know Dr. Bradley is going to France with a Red Cross unit?

PAULA: Oh, dear! He was the best doctor in town and the only one who understood my case.

JEAN: I forgot to tell you that I saw Dickie looking at the enlistment posters the other day, Paula. You mustn't let him do that or he'll get trench fever.

SUE: Stop teasing Paula.

RUTH: When does Harold go, Ethel?

ETHEL: I don't know. He's hardly in the service yet. I don't know very much about it anyway, because I—

PAULA: Oh, she isn't a bit more patriotic than I am. She's been trying and trying to keep Harold out of it, I know very well. [*All girls look suddenly at Ethel.*]

ETHEL [*rising*]: Yes, it's true. I've tried everything to keep him from enlisting. I don't care whether I'm right or not. It's easy to be patriotic when you've got nobody to go, but when you have just one and that one your husband— [*She sits down again and hides her face in her hands.*]

RUTH [*going to her and patting her shoulder*]: Don't cry, dear. I know. Didn't John go just as we were engaged? Don't you think it hurt? The only time I can bear to think of it at all is to think how proud I'll be when he comes home again.

ETHEL: If he does come home.

RUTH: The chances are just as good for him to come back as not. Not every man that goes to war is killed by any means.

PAULA: That is what Dickie says and tries to prove it to me by figures. But I don't believe it. I don't believe all I hear about this war anyway. No, and I don't believe half I hear about German atrocities, either.

MOLLY: There's no use talking to you, Paula. You're not unpatriotic in some ways, but you're thoroughly selfish. [*Enter Myrtle Middleton in Red Cross uniform.*]

MYRTLE: Good afternoon, girls. I just ran in to bring this letter to you, Ethel, and tell you my luck. I'm going to France with Dr. Bradley's Red Cross unit.

SUE: Oh, Myrtle, take me with you.

MYRTLE: Go try your luck with the Doctor as I did.

PAULA: What do you know about nursing, Myrtle Middleton?

MYRTLE: Not enough to take charge of a hospital immediately, I admit, Paula. I think they'll break me in scrubbing floors.

PAULA: You know less about scrubbing floors than you do nursing.

MYRTLE: I can learn. But, say, Paula. Why didn't you tell me your husband had enlisted.

PAULA: He hasn't. He's in the draft, that's all. I'm going to claim exemption for him, too.

MYRTLE: I saw Dickie Stickney and Harold Cummings down town, both in uniform. Dickie had evidently enlisted in the navy.

PAULA: Nonsense! You were dreaming.

MYRTLE: Perhaps. But I thought I was wide awake, because I spoke to them both. Here's your letter, Ethel.

ETHEL [*taking letter*]: Thank you. What a battered envelope! It is covered with foreign post-marks, too. It must have come from abroad. Why, it may be from Helen Barrows. She is my only foreign correspondent. I haven't heard from her since the war broke out. Girls, you remember Helen. She was my roommate the last two years in college. She married a German professor and went to Germany to live. I'll read her letter aloud, no doubt it will be interesting. [*Opens letter.*] "Dear Ethel:—It is ages since I heard from you, so long I wonder if you are still alive. My husband was called to the colors and was among the first to give his life for his Fatherland. I have since been living with his people and lately have been working in a munition factory—"

PAULA: A munition factory! Helen Barrows! Why, she was the dearest, sweetest thing. I had a positive crush on her the summer she spent with you, Ethel. The idea of her working in a place like that.

MOLLY: Don't interrupt, Paula. Read on, Ethel.

ETHEL: "I often think of the happy, happy days in America. They will never come again. I wonder if I will ever see home again!" * * * It is crossed and blotted here. Wait, I can read

this sentence: "I wish somebody would kill the Kaiser. It is the only thing that will end this awful slaughter."

JEAN: That's a queer sentence to get by the censor.

ETHEL: What's this. Look, Sue, do I read it correctly. [*Sue looks over her shoulder and both she and Ethel read aloud very slowly and distinctly.*] "For writing this sentence your friend was shot at sunrise this morning, May 15, 1917." [*The girls look at each other in silence.*]

JEAN: How terrible!

ETHEL: She was an American citizen and we were not at war. How did they dare do it?

MOLLY: No, she wasn't, Ethel. When a woman marries she becomes a citizen of her husband's country. Helen was a German subject and had no redress.

PAULA: Oh, I can't believe it! Helen Barrows! [*Stands up suddenly.*] Dickie shall go to war! I'll make him! I wish I could go myself. I've never believed before stories of these things but now—

MYRTLE: I'm glad you read this to us, Ethel. We all realize more than ever before what we are escaping.

SUE: We must go. I just caught sight of two recruits coming up the driveway. Their wives won't want us around when they receive

them. [*Girls begin to put on wraps. Enter Harold Cummings and Dickie Stickney in uniform.*]

HAROLD: Don't run away from us, girls.

MOLLY: No, we're not afraid of you, but we're very proud to see you in khaki on the other hand. Private Cummings, I salute you. Dickie, you're a brave man. [*Harold and Dickie stand at attention with hands raised in salute as one by one the girls pass out in front of them. Each girl salutes merrily as she goes. When they have gone Dickie and Harold wheel with military precision and face their wives, hands still raised in salute. In a flash Ethel brings her heels together and raises her hand in salute. Then she runs to Harold and he puts his arm about her. Paula stands looking fixedly at Dickie who does not move an inch.*]

ETHEL: Harold! Harold! I'm glad, and sorry and glad—[*Paula runs to Dickie and shakes his arm.*]

PAULA: Dickie, you bad boy. How did you dare to do it. But if you must do it, why did you enlist in the navy? The uniform isn't at all becoming. You look just like a hand organ monkey in it.

DICKIE: I tried everything and this is the only place that would have me. Honest to goodness, Paula, it's no cinch going to war and getting the berth you want.

PAULA: And you're beginning to talk sailor lingo so soon. "Getting a berth," you said. The next thing you know you will call me your "heartie" or something like that. You help me on with my coat and I'll take you home and teach you to respect your wife. I'll give you the worst wiggling you ever had. [*Dickie winks at Harold as he helps Paula on with her coat.*]

PAULA: Goodbye, Ethel. Goodbye, Harold. You put Dickie up to this I know. You ought to be spanked.

HAROLD: Oh, Paula, be kind to him. Be kind. [*Exit Paula and Dickie.*] Poor fellow, he'll get his all right. He says she's been positively nasty about enlisting, and has threatened to make a fool of him by claiming exemption for him if he was drafted.

ETHEL: Don't worry about Dickie. Paula won't say a word to him now. After you read this letter you'll understand. [*Gives him letter.*] But before you read it, I want to say that I didn't have to receive it to make me willing for you to go. The minute you slammed the door and said you were going in spite of me I was willing—more than that, I was proud of you. And—

HAROLD: And—

ETHEL: I think your uniform is perfectly stunning.

HAROLD: Brass buttons, Ethel, only brass buttons.

ETHEL: Women are always caught with brass buttons and I'm only a woman, you see.

[CURTAIN.]

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